Violence threatens polio eradication by 2018

President Obama in his last State of Union address predicted that, "*instability will continue for decades in many parts of the world -- in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, parts of Pakistan, in parts of Central America, in Africa, and Asia"*.[1] Violence has been a part of everyday life in the area covering the north western Afghan border and parts of Pakistan including Quetta and Federally Administrative Tribal Areas (FATA). Geopolitical instability has exacerbated polio.[2] Unless political efforts by Afghanistan and Pakistan ensure that violence is reduced, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) target to eradicate the disease worldwide by 2018 may not be met.[3]

Violence in parts of Pakistan severely hampers efforts to eradicate polio. On January 13, 2016, a blast near a polio station in Quetta killed 14 people and injured over 10.[4] Six days later, 10 people were killed by a blast near the border of FATA. Fresh violence raises doubts about the ability of the 2018 polio eradication strategy to reach its target. The problem is concentrated in a small number of highly unstable, dangerous places. Polio remains endemic in Pakistan and Afghanistan, primarily because of its recalcitrance in these unstable areas.[5]

Violence often stops eradication efforts such as vaccination programmes for children. On January 11, 2016, a polio campaign was launched in Quetta aimed at 2.4 million children below the age of 5 (including 55,000 children in Afghan Refugee families).[6] Two days after start of the campaign, a blast near the polio team's base temporarily suspended their work.[4] Although the attack was not necessarily targeted at them, the risk to the polio workers increased. Whilst work in this case resumed quickly, disruption cycles are potentially longer in remoter areas such as Balochistan and FATA. Remoteness and violence conspire with other factors such as population beliefs and insufficient health provision to block the path to eradication.

The GPEI is committed to eradicating polio by 2018. In 2015, the WHO announced Nigeria to be epidemic free.[5] With only Afghanistan and Pakistan remaining, the role of violence in hampering eradication efforts is clear. However, the signs are not promising. Despite full scale military operations in parts of Pakistan, violence is not dying down. Therefore, President Obama's words demand attention from policy makers. Polio as a disease may be entrenched for decades in this turbulent part of the world unless the war on violence is won first.

Key Words: polio eradication, violence, Afghanistan, Pakistan

We declare no competing interests.
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